

*CLAIM AMENDMENTS*

We claim as our invention:

1. (Currently Amended) A binding element ~~(20)~~ for use in binding stacks of sheets having openings spaced at standard distances from one another, the sheets defining a back gauge between the openings and an edge of the sheets, the binding element comprising:

an elongated spine ~~(22)~~

at least two and no more than seven fingers ~~(30, 32)~~ forming closed loops with the spine, said fingers being adapted for movement between an open position for receiving said stack of sheets and a closed position for maintaining said stack of sheets, said fingers being spaced at said standard distances for receipt into said openings, and

structure for maintaining said fingers in said closed position.

2. (Original) The binding element of claim 1 wherein the spine and fingers are unitarily formed of a polymeric material.

3. (Currently Amended) The binding element of ~~claims 1 or 2~~ claim 1 wherein each said finger has a central axis, said binding element comprising two fingers having central axes spaced apart on the order of 2.75 inches (7 cm).

4. (Currently Amended) The binding element of ~~claims 1 or 2~~ claim 1 wherein each said finger has a central axis, said binding element comprising two fingers having central axes spaced apart on the order of 8.5 inches (21.5 cm).

5. (Currently Amended) The binding element of ~~claims 1 or 2~~ claim 1 comprising first, second and third fingers wherein each said finger has a central axis, said ~~binding element~~

~~comprising three~~ first, second and third fingers being linearly disposed, and said first and second fingers having central axes spaced apart on the order of 4.25 inches (11 cm), and said second and third fingers having central axes spaced apart on the order of 4.25 inches (11 cm).

6. (Currently Amended) The binding element of ~~claims 1 or 2~~ claim 1 wherein each said finger has a central axis, said binding element comprising two fingers having central axes spaced apart on the order of 3.15 inches (8 cm).

7. (Currently Amended) The binding element of ~~claims 1 or 2~~ claim 1 comprising first, second, third, and fourth fingers wherein each said finger has a central axis, said ~~binding element comprising four~~ first, second, third and fourth fingers linearly disposed, said first and second fingers having central axes spaced apart on the order of 3.15 inches (8 cm) said second and third fingers having central axes spaced apart on the order of 3.15 inches (8 cm), and said third and fourth fingers having central axes spaced apart on the order of 3.15 inches (8 cm).

8. (Currently Amended) The binding element of ~~claims 1 or 2~~ claim 1 wherein each said finger has a central axis, said binding element comprising two fingers having central axes spaced apart on the order of 6.3 inches (16 cm).

9. (Currently Amended) The binding element of ~~claims 1 or 2~~ claim 1 wherein each said finger has a central axis, said binding element comprising five fingers linearly disposed including a central finger, a pair of outermost fingers, and a pair of intermediate fingers disposed between the central and outermost fingers, the outermost fingers having central axes spaced on the order of 4.25 inches (11 cm) from the central axis of the central finger, and the intermediate fingers having central axes spaced on the order of 3.25 inches (8.5 cm) from the central axis.

10. (Currently Amended) The binding element of ~~claims 1 or 2~~ claim 1 wherein each said finger has a central axis, said binding element comprising seven fingers linearly disposed including a central finger, a pair of outermost fingers, a first pair of intermediate

fingers disposed between the central and outermost fingers, and a second pair of intermediate fingers disposed between the central and the first pair of intermediate fingers, the outermost fingers having central axes spaced on the order of 4.25 inches (11 cm) from the central axis of the central finger, the first set of intermediate fingers having central axes spaced on the order of 3.25 inches (8.5 cm) from the central axis, and the second set of intermediate fingers having central axes spaced on the order of 2.25 inches (5.5 cm) from the central axis..

11. (Currently Amended) The binding element of any of ~~claims 1-10~~ claim 1 wherein the fingers form a closed loop with the spine, the closed loop having a generally oval shape having a major diameter and a minor diameter, the major diameter is at least 0.05 inch greater than twice the back gauge, and the minor diameter is at least 0.10 inch greater than the back gauge.

12. (Currently Amended) The binding element of any of ~~claims 1-10~~ claim 1 wherein the fingers form a closed loop with the spine, the closed loop having a generally "D" shape having a major diameter and a minor diameter, the major diameter is at least 0.03 greater than twice the back gauge, and the minor diameter is at least 0.10 inch greater than the back gauge, the minor diameter being disposed between the spine and the fingers.

13. (Currently Amended) The binding element of ~~claims 11 or 12~~ claim 11 wherein the major diameter is no more than 0.50 inch greater than twice the back gauge, and the minor diameter is no more than 0.20 inch greater than the back gauge.

14. (Currently Amended) The binding element of ~~claims 11 or 12~~ claim 11 the major diameter and a minor diameter, the major diameter being on the order of 0.05 inch greater than twice the back gauge, and the minor diameter being on the order of 0.15 inch greater than the back gauge.

15. (Currently Amended) The binding element of any of ~~claims 1-14~~ claim 1 further comprising structure to secure the fingers in said closed position.

16. (Original) The binding element of claim 15 wherein the spine and at least one said finger comprises mating structure, and the structure to secure comprises said mating structure.

17. (Currently Amended) The binding element of claim 15 wherein each finger ~~fingers~~ comprises a pair of finger elements and at least one said pair of finger elements has mating structure at its distal ends, and the structure to secure comprises the mating structure.

18. (Original) The binding element of claim 15 wherein the spine comprises at least a pair of elongated spine elements, and the structure to secure comprises a coupling structure along the spine elements.

19. (Original) The binding element of claim 15 further comprising end tab portions, said structure to secure comprising a coupling structure along the end tab portions.

20. (Original) The binding element of claim 15 wherein the structure to secure comprises a biasing structure that biases the fingers in a closed position.

21. (Currently Amended) The binding element of any of ~~claims 15-20~~ claim 15 wherein the structure to secure substantially permanently secures the fingers in a closed position.

22. (Currently Amended) The binding element of any of ~~claims 15-20~~ claim 15 wherein the structure to secure releasably secures the fingers in a closed position.

23. (Currently Amended) The binding element of any of ~~claims 1-15~~ claim 1 wherein the spine comprises at least two hingedly coupled, elongated spine elements.

24. (Currently Amended) The binding element of any of ~~claims 1-15~~ claim 1 wherein each finger comprise a pair of finger elements extending from the elongated spine elements respectively.

25. (Currently Amended) The binding element of any of ~~claims 1-24~~ claim 1 wherein the spine has a length on the order of 8-16.5 inches (20-42 cm).

26. (Original) The binding element of claim 25 wherein the spine has a length on the order of 8.3 inches (21 cm), 8.5 inches (21.5 cm), 11 inches (28 cm), 11.7 inches (30 cm), 14 inches (35.5 cm), or 16 inches (40.5 cm).

27. (Cancelled)